

Snow Ball, 1984 by pathvain_aelien

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-12-02

Updated: 2017-12-02

Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:08:23

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 13,497

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Eleven has a surprise for Mike.

Snow Ball, 1984

For Loti-miko, who wanted a second fashion show.

“Mike!” Dustin calls, peering around the basement as if he suspects Mike might be hiding from him. They are supposed to be starting their campaign today, but there’s no sign of their Dungeon Master. Dustin is undaunted by the silence, he merely shrugs off his backpack and makes himself comfortable on the couch. The guys rarely bother with knocking at each other’s houses, anyway.

“Hey,” Lucas says, coming in through the basement door with Will.

“Hey, guys,” Dustin responds cheerfully.

“How long have you been here? And where’s Mike?” Will asks.

“About three seconds, and no idea.”

“He’s not here?” Lucas asks, flopping down beside him on the couch.

“Do you see him anywhere? I mean, you do have eyes, correct?”

“Shut up. I meant, is he home?”

“Probably,” Dustin says nonchalantly. “I didn’t look.”

Lucas sighs but doesn’t argue. There’s no point, although sometimes he can’t help himself. He heaves himself up from the couch and heads upstairs without a backward glance to see if they’re following. He doesn’t have to. He knows they will. He opens the basement door and strides through the kitchen. Mrs. Wheeler is feeding Holly and talking on the phone. She isn’t startled at all to see someone randomly pass through her kitchen. She doesn’t even look up. She’s used to Mike’s friends coming and going whenever they please. It really only bothers her when one of them turns out to be a girl living in her basement. She gives him a little wave with Holly’s spoon and he waves back before thundering up the stairs.

“Mike?” Lucas calls. No response.

“MIKE!” Dustin bellows in left ear, making him cringe. He waits until they’re all safely up the stairs before punching Dustin in the shoulder. His ear is still ringing.

“I’m in here!” A faint voice calls.

“Where’s here?” Dustin screams in response.

“In my room, where else would I be?” Mike says dimly.

“Oh.”

“Dumbass,” Lucas scoffs, rolling his eyes. Dustin ignores him. He pushes around his friend and throws open Mike’s door. Or tries to. There’s definitely something impeding him, because the door only opens about eight inches before it meets resistance. He pushes harder, but it doesn’t budge. Screw it. He squeezes himself into the opening and climbs over the Mount Everest of clothing piles. His right shoe sinks into a couple of sweaters and he wrenches it free. Once he’s over, he looks at it with interest. It appears that the entire contents of Mike’s closet are now on the floor. And a bunch of clothes he’s never seen before, as well. He picks up an awful plaid sweater and looks at it in disbelief as Lucas and Will also burrow their way in.

“What. The. Hell. Is. This?” Dustin asks, shaking the sweater. It looks like something an elderly golfer would wear. An elderly blind golfer who didn’t know any better. Lucas elbows him and he looks up. Sees Mike.

“What the hell is that?!” His voice cracks a little on the last word. His fingers relax and the sweater tumbles back onto the mountain. He doesn’t even notice.

“It sucks, doesn’t it?” Mike asks him. He looks dejected.

Dustin can’t even begin to form a response. Lucas and Will lock eyes, mentally debating on how to proceed. Tell him it’s fine? Ask him what the fuck is wrong with him? Will breaks eye contact first.

“Um. What’s it for?” He asks, as politely as possible given the

circumstances. Mike's face falls at the guarded look on Will's face. That look says everything he needs to know.

"The Snow Ball," he mumbles.

"Jesus Christ," Lucas says, and this time, Dustin elbows him.

"Well. Um. Did you...did you pick it out yourself?" That's the best Dustin can do. He sits on the edge of Mike's bed and rests an elbow on his leg. Puts a fist over his mouth. It looks like he's merely contemplating the outfit, but it's also masking the sudden giggling fit.

Apparently not that well, though, because Mike throws a cufflink at him.

"No. My mom bought it, because I told her I didn't have anything to wear," Mike snaps. Dustin looks at the mountain on the floor.

"I can see that," Dustin snickers, and ducks before the other cufflink can hit him.

"Is it really that bad?" Mike asks Lucas and Will, because apparently Dustin isn't going to be helpful at all. Dustin is cackling, but to his credit, he's trying very hard not to. His face is red with the effort.

"Um. It's, um. Kind of..."

"Shiny?" Lucas supplies, and Will nods in relief.

"And orange," Dustin giggles. "Don't forget orange."

Mike looks in the mirror again. It is shiny. It is resplendent, in fact. And it is most definitely orange. It is fucking horrible. It's possible the worst suit he's ever seen in his life.

"It's very retro," Dustin adds. "You just need some sideburns and a perm and, like, a ruffled shirt."

Wordlessly, Mike pulls a shirt out of the closet and tosses it to him. Dustin picks it up and examines it carefully. It's long-sleeved. It's

white. And there are fucking ruffles everywhere.

Lucas and Will howl with laughter. They can't help it. Lucas abruptly sits on the pile of clothing and Will pulls him back up before he can sink.

"Jesus Christ. Your mom wants you to wear that? In public? She must totally hate you," Lucas gasps in between giggles. Mike's struggling out of his clothes. He throws them angrily into a separate pile, because they definitely don't deserve to be in the other pile, the pile with the normal clothing. He extracts a pair of jeans and a sweater and pulls them on.

"It's fucking horrible," Mike says. He flops onto the bed, face-down. Dustin pats him sympathetically on the back, while Lucas throws a blanket over the suit. The light shining in through the blinds was reflecting off the suit and making him dizzy.

"It's okay, Mike," Dustin says. He looks to the other guys for support. They rally immediately.

"Yeah! You still have almost a week. Plenty of time. We'll help you, right?" Will looks at Lucas, who sighs. He's had his outfit picked out for weeks. He's a good planner. But Mike looks like shit, so he's not going to lecture.

"Yeah, of course," Lucas mumbles.

Mike's face is still buried in his quilt. Dustin pats him on the back again.

"Do you need a fashion show, Mike?"

Mike lifts his head immediately. "A what?"

Lucas groans. "We are not having another fashion show, Dustin!"

Dustin smirks. "So you admit that we DID have one. Previously."

"Shut up," Lucas snarls. He looks to Will for support, but Will's giggling again. No help there.

Dustin turns back to Mike. "A fashion show! You can model all of your clothes and we'll pick out an outfit," he says, beaming at him.

"And this has to do with helping me, and not making me look like an ass?"

Dustin shrugs. "A little of column A, a little of column B," he tells Mike honestly.

Mike sighs. "I guess. But like, not right now."

"No time like the present, Mike," Dustin tells him cheerfully.

"We can't right now," he says, standing up and shoving part of the mountain out of the way of the door.

"Why not?"

"El's here," Mike says, throwing a couple of jackets back into his closet. Not on the hangers, but close enough. They land on the floor in a heap and he shuts the door on them.

Lucas and Dustin gape at each other.

"How do you know?" Lucas asks. Mike doesn't bother to respond, because Mike's already out the door and halfway down the stairs.

"Not normal at all," Dustin tells Lucas and Will for the millionth time, before following. They hurdle through the kitchen, waving at Mrs. Wheeler as they pass her. She's still on the phone. Lucas yanks Mike back by the collar before he can start down the basement stairs.

"You go last," he tells him, pushing around him and running down.

"Why?" Mike asks in bewilderment, as Dustin shoves around him, too.

"So we can say hi first. Then we can do something else while you guys like, get lost in each other's eyes or whatever." Mike splutters and Will looks at him apologetically, before squeezing around him. Mike sighs and follows them.

“El!” Lucas cries, waving at her. Dustin barrels past him and gives her a hug. Will waits patiently and she hugs him as soon as Dustin releases her. Dustin turns to Hopper, who’s lurking near the door. He opens his arms and moves forward, as if to hug him, too.

“Hop!” Dustin cries enthusiastically, as if he hasn’t seen Hopper in years. Hopper gives him a glare and Dustin falters. His arms wilt back down to his sides. Maybe next time.

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours,” Hopper tells Eleven. She nods without even looking at him. Hopper sighs.

“Our campaigns usually take about ten hours,” Lucas informs him.

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours,” he repeats.

The guys shrug as Hopper leaves. Will’s studying Eleven carefully, because Eleven looks different. Upset. It’s hard to pinpoint it, because her face is impassive, even if her eyes aren’t. He can see the tension in her body. Will looks thoughtfully at the closed door, replaying the way Hopper and El just interacted. He has a sudden sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, even if he’s not completely surprised. He’s pretty sure he can guess what’s upsetting her. Mike bounds down the stairs and Will abruptly moves to the table, tugging on Lucas’s cuff to pull him with him. Dustin sees their hasty retreat and joins them without another word.

Mike skids to a halt in front of her.

“Hey, El!” He says happily.

“Hi Mike,” she says. Her words are even more contained than usual and Mike looks at her closely. Something is wrong.

“What’s wrong?” He asks. She doesn’t look at him. He casts a bewildered look at the guys. The guys start talking as loudly as possible to give them the illusion of privacy. Eleven stares at the floor until Mike gently lifts her face with his hand. She meets his eyes. They are as expressive as always. He’s not sure what’s wrong, but he is sure she’s upset. And worried. Her eyes look the way they did after he yelled at her, when he thought she had lied about Will being alive.

Mike's hand drops from her face and he takes her hand instead. He opens the basement door for her and they walk outside without a word to the others. They don't sit; it's too cold for that. He stands in front of her and meets her eyes again. Waits patiently while she finds the words.

It's always hard to find the words, but this time is even worse. She knows the words will hurt him, and she hates the idea of hurting him. She thinks about trying to tell him the other way, inside his mind, but she can't. It's impossible to block any thoughts when they are thinking at each other, and she's afraid he'll be angry. She can't bear to hear-to feel-his anger. She has to speak the other way. The normal way. They stare at each other for almost a full minute before she can speak.

"Mike." It's not much, but it's a start. It's the best she can do right now.

"Yeah? What's wrong?" He asks her, concerned.

"I can't...I can't go."

"Go where?"

Her dark eyes plead with him to help her, to understand. And he does. His face falls and she can easily read the disappointment in his eyes.

"The Snow Ball? You can't go to the Snow Ball?" He asks the question as quietly as possible because he can see she's worried, and she nods sadly.

"But why?" As if he doesn't already know. His voice breaks a little and she flinches. He sees it and takes her hand again. "Hopper?" He asks her bitterly. She nods again.

"He says...it's not safe."

"Not safe? To be out in public? You've been out before and he was okay with it."

Eleven looks at their joined hands. She can't meet his eyes anymore

because she can see the hurt in them. It hurts something inside her to see it.

“He says...too many people. People that...might know. Know me.” She glances up and meets his eyes quickly to see if he understands. He does.

“Troy and James,” Mike says. Those fuckers. Even when they aren’t around, they’re causing problems.

“And...at school. He says it’s not safe at school.”

Someone else might not understand what she means, but Mike does. He almost always does. Hopper thinks it isn’t safe for Eleven to be in the school, the same school the massacre occurred last year. The last place she was before she disappeared. Mike remembers the rumors very well. The Russian girl, working for the government. Not everyone has forgotten the rumors. Mike doesn’t like Hopper much, can’t like Hopper much, but he knows Hopper didn’t make this decision lightly. And he knows Hopper is just trying to keep her safe, even if he disagrees with his methods. That doesn’t make it feel any better. He actually feels pretty fucking crushed. The Snow Ball had been important to him for over a year. Important to them. It’s just a cheesy school dance, true. But it’s also more than that. It’s something he’s been holding on to, even when she was gone. The start of something between them. Something official.

Mike sighs and Eleven looks up again. His eyes are sad.

“Are you...are you mad?” She asks timidly. Mike has been angry with her three times before, and she never wants him to be angry with her again. Mike sees her fear, knows exactly what she’s thinking. He smiles a little. A tiny smile, but it relieves her.

“No. I’m not mad at you. At all.” His tone is emphatic and she smiles. “I’m just disappointed. I really wanted to go with you.” His voice is as quiet as hers.

“I wanted to go, too,” she says. And she did. She does. She’s not aware of the term silent treatment, but the term is completely appropriate for the Hopper household the last couple of days. She’s

barely spoken to Hopper or even looked at him, when she can avoid it. She isn't angry, not like she was before she returned, but she's upset. Crushed. She's looking at their hands again. His hand looks nice in hers. Pretty. A lock of hair falls in her face and Mike gently tucks it behind her ear.

"It's okay. We'll do something else, another time," he tells her, because he can see she's as upset as he is. The words don't seem to cheer her up, because she's been turning something over in her mind ever since Hopper told her she couldn't go. Something that's worse than not being able to go.

"Will you..." she starts, and then trails off. He waits patiently. He would help her out if he knew what she wants to say, but he doesn't. Not this time. He just knows she's still anxious about something. He watches her until she's ready. Her face is a little pink, and not from the cold.

"Will you...go with someone...else?" Her voice is always quiet, but this question is almost inaudible. Almost. He just stares at her in shock. She stares back, trying to read the expression in his brown eyes. The silence spins out until Mike laughs. She raises her eyebrows a little and watches him. She's not sure what's so funny. She's not feeling funny at all.

"Someone else?" Mike asks. His voice sound a little strangled because he's still laughing. He sees that she's still worried and sobers immediately. "No! No. Definitely not."

"No?" She asks him hopefully. He smiles because he hears the tone. There's no mistaking it.

"No. No way. I only want to go with you, not anyone else." And miraculously, for once, he doesn't blush. She checks his eyes quickly for the lie but doesn't find it. He means it. She smiles and this time it's actually a happy smile. He grins back at her. He's as happy as he can be. He's still bitterly disappointed that she can't go with him, but at least she's here. With him. And that's enough to make him feel grateful.

Three days later, Hopper is sitting on the couch and eating chips. It's

1 pm on a Wednesday, and Wednesdays are usually pretty good. Not as great as Fridays, but way better than Mondays. Eleven is home for once and he's glad. It's a lot harder to pretend he's just watching it to keep her company when she's not actually in the house. But her friends went back to school this week, so Eleven's always here when he comes home for lunch. Not that she's been speaking to him, but at least she's here.

"Hey, kid." He's talking to her closed door. "Carrie's in this episode," he calls temptingly. Carrie is her favorite character. There's no response and he sighs. He sets the bowl of chips aside and walks to her door. Knocks. "Can I come in?" Holds his breath, just in case.

"Yes."

He opens the door and walks in. Eleven's sitting on the floor in front of her bed, surrounded by kittens. She's dangling a shoelace for them to play with. Judging from their reactions, a shoelace is apparently preferable to all of the fucking actual toys he bought them. He sits next to her on the floor. She doesn't look at him.

"Kid. Let's talk about it." She doesn't respond, so he tries again. "I know you're mad. And I'm sorry. I'm not trying to make you mad. I'm not trying to be the bad guy here."

"No."

"No? No, what?"

"Not mad." That's news to him.

"You aren't?"

"No. Sad."

Hopper is silent. He's not sure how to deal with her sadness. He's barely proficient in anger, but he would prefer anger. He can't stand to see the quiet sadness on her face.

"I'm sorry," he says, and means it.

"I know. It's okay."

"You don't look okay," he tells her gently.

"Just sad. I just...wanted to go. We promised."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Last year." She glances up at him, and he understands her eyes this time.

"Oh." He takes the shoelace from her and dangles it in the air. The Will kitten leaps for it and misses, knocking into the Lucas kitten, who jumps into the air in surprise. Hopper laughs, but Eleven doesn't. Hopper isn't sure what to do. What to say. He knows how much she wants to go, and he expected anger. Fury, in fact. He didn't expect this quiet sorrow. He's proud of her for not being angry and lashing out, but he'd also rather she be furious with him than sad. He knows the doctor agreed to a night out, a night in public, but Hopper put a stop to it. He's not comfortable with her being back at the school. Back at the scene of the crime, so to speak. He tries to sort through his feelings, logically. Tries to decide if he's worried because there's a real danger, or if he's just being overprotective. If he's being a cop, or a father.

Eleven gently strokes the Dustin kitten, asleep in her lap. She's startled when Hopper suddenly speaks.

"Look. If I let you go," he starts, and she meets his eyes immediately. He can see the hope in them. It's a cautious hope. "I will be waiting outside the whole time. The whole time. And if I get a hunch, if anything feels even the slightest bit weird to me, we leave. Right then. No argument. Okay?"

Eleven's short hair flies into her face because she's nodding so enthusiastically. He laughs at her excitement. She throws her arms around him and hugs him as best she can, considering they're side by side on the floor. The Dustin kitten falls off her lap and gives her a reproachful look before joining his siblings. Hopper hugs her back.

"Thank you," she tells him quietly. He rests his chin on the top of her head for a moment before gently disengaging.

“Okay. Enough of the hugging. We can still see the rest of the show,” he says, standing up and moving toward the door. She follows him eagerly. They settle in and he hands her the bowl of chips. The episode’s almost over but she’s not even paying attention. She can’t wait to tell Mike. She eats a chip absently, staring at the screen. The Snow Ball is in three days. She knows Mike is still going with his friends. Dustin isn’t going with a date, either. Maybe she shouldn’t tell him? Maybe it should be a surprise? Or is that a lie? Friends don’t lie, that’s one thing she’s sure of. But a surprise isn’t exactly a lie, is it? She likes the idea of it being a surprise, but she doesn’t want to hurt him. She knows how disappointed he is.

Eleven sneaks a quick glance at Hopper. He’s engrossed in the show. What if he changes his mind? Again? After she tells Mike? And then he will be hurt again. She doesn’t want that. It should be a surprise, just in case. She tunes into the show, just for the final few minutes. Carrie and Austin are going to a party. Carrie looks even prettier than usual in a pink dress. Oh no. She doesn’t have a dress. Not even one. She has jeans and overalls. She didn’t pick out a dress because she knew she didn’t need one. But now she does.

She looks at Hopper again. She already knows, Hopper won’t be any help. Hopper couldn’t explain why her overalls weren’t okay to wear when she went bowling. Nancy? Nancy could help. But Nancy might tell Mike. Or Mike would find out, because they live in the same house. Eleven mentally runs through her list, wondering who could help her.

Steve? Steve is good at dates. Dustin told her so. But she doesn’t know him well enough to ask him. Joyce! Joyce will be happy to help her. Except that Joyce is always busy at work. She doesn’t want to bother Joyce. That leaves her friends. She senses that they can keep a secret. Her secret. They’ve done it before, although Mike was in on the secret last time. And she knows they can help, because she helped them. She helped choose their clothes. That must be something that friends always do for each other. She smiles in relief at the thought.

When the show is over and Hopper leaves for work, she gets a drink from the kitchen. Looks at the phone. She needs to talk to her friends now, but they are at school. She can’t call them at school. Eleven smiles. She can’t call them the normal way, but she can call them.

She sets her glass of water on the counter without even drinking it. Makes herself comfortable in front of the TV. She's more powerful now, ever since she closed the gate. She usually doesn't need the TV anymore, but she's never connected with them mentally. Not like she has with Mike.

She pulls her blindfold out from under the couch. The Mike kitten darts for it and she gently scoops her up instead and places the kitten in her lap. She ties the blindfold and thinks of her friends. Not Mike, although Mike would be easy. The surprise is for him, so she can't ask him for help. Will is the best choice after Mike, because he would be easy, too. But she can't choose Will. She can get into his mind, but she also can't. His mind was not his own, recently. His mind is still healing. Not Will. She closes her eyes and focuses, thinking of one of her other friends. Thinking at him.

Dustin is sitting at his desk in Mr. Clarke's class. It's his favorite class. His book and notebook are on the desk in front of him, but the book isn't open. Mr. Clarke usually doesn't need the book to teach, which is one of the many reasons it's his favorite class. Mr. Clarke just knows.

Dustin.

The voice is right in his ear and it startles him. He jerks and his arm knocks the textbook onto the floor. His pencil rolls over the edge of the desk and out of sight. Dustin doesn't notice, he's staring to his right, where the voice originated. Lucas is staring back at him blankly, but he already knows it wasn't Lucas. It was a girl's voice. Kids are giggling and Mr. Clarke is looking at him patiently, still holding a piece of chalk. Dustin glances around but the voice (if there was a voice) is silent, so he leans over to pick up his stuff.

"Sorry, Mr. Clarke," he says, and grins. Mr. Clarke returns the grin and resumes.

Dustin.

Dustin jumps again, but mercifully doesn't knock anything over this time.

“What?” He asks automatically.

“What do you mean, what?” Lucas hisses at him. Dustin gapes at him and then shrugs.

“Nothing. I guess.”

Dustin. It’s me.

“El?” He asks in surprise, but more quietly this time. Lucas angles his body to look at him again and Dustin turns red. He’s suddenly aware of how insane he must look right now. Talking to invisible people.

Yes. You don’t have to talk. Not with words.

Now you tell me.

This is not fucking normal. Eleven talking to him this way. And while he’s at school. Something must be wrong, seriously wrong. He swallows the panic and tries to communicate again.

What’s wrong?

I need help.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

“MIKE!” He screams in panic, without even thinking twice. The class, as one, turns to look at him again. Mr. Clarke is watching him in concern. Mike is staring at him in concern. Fuck. He would stare at himself in concern, if it were physically possible. As far as they know, he is losing his fucking marbles right in front of them.

“Dustin?” Mr. Clarke asks, at the same time Mike says, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

No! Not Mike. Don’t say anything.

Dustin ignores the million eyes that are collectively boring a hole into him right now. One shaky hand goes to his forehead and rubs it absently. His forehead is plastered with sweat.

Are you hurt? Is it the government guys? Are you in danger?

No! I'm okay. I'm fine.

Dustin breathes a huge sigh of relief and his sweaty hand falls to the desk with a little thud. He glances around. Everyone is eyeing him with curiosity. Some people are giggling. Apparently this is the most fun they've had in this fucking class all fucking year.

"Um." He says blankly, staring at Mike, who is still waiting for a response. "Can I...borrow a pen? I need a pen. Yeah. I only have a pencil. And I want a pen. So I need a pen. From you." He picks up the pencil and jabs it in the air to illustrate that it is indeed a pencil, and not a pen. Mike raises his eyebrows at him and wordlessly hands him a pen. Mike's staring at him as if he's suddenly turned into an alien. Or a Demogorgon. Dustin clutches the pencil to him as if it were something precious.

"Thanks! Thank you. Okay. Thanks. Sorry. Sorry everyone," he babbles incoherently, turning back to Mr. Clarke. "Sorry. Please continue, my lord."

Mr. Clarke gapes at him for a few seconds, before bravely resuming his lecture. The outburst is a little odd, but not completely out of the ordinary. Not from Dustin, anyway. Slowly, the class turns its attention back to their teacher. Most of the class. His friends are still staring at him. Lucas gestures with one hand. What the hell is going on? Dustin wipes the sweat from his forehead and focuses on his notebook to avoid their collective gaze. He senses Eleven is still there. Here. Whatever the fuck the proper term is, considering she's using telepathy. He can feel her, a light presence in his mind. It's not exactly an unpleasant feeling, just a fucking weird one.

Jesus. You scared me.

I'm sorry.

What's up? What do you need help with?

Don't tell Mike.

Don't tell Mike what?

It's a surprise.

Okay...what am I not telling him?

Promise?

Yeah. Of course. Promise. What's up?

I need a fashion show.

Dustin's borrowed pen slips out of his hand and rolls onto the floor. It comes to rest under Lucas's desk. He mashes his lips together as hard as he can, but it's not working. The giggles are spilling out helplessly. He tries to manufacture a cough before everyone starts looking again. Jesus Christ this is fucking nuts. This is fucking surreal. Did she seriously just ask me that? Maybe I caught whatever Mike had. Maybe I'm hallucinating all of this shit. It's not working. He can't help it. He's howling with laughter and there's no fucking way to pretend it's a coughing fit.

"Dustin?" Mr. Clarke asks. He doesn't sound irritated at all, merely curious, which is another reason he's Dustin's favorite teacher.

"Um," Dustin manages, giggling feebly. "Bathroom, Mr. Clarke?" He hiccups. Mr. Clarke gestures toward the door and Dustin sprints for it, holding his hand over his mouth to stifle the little screams of mirth.

"What the hell was that?" Lucas asks. Mike and Will shrug.

As soon as he's in the bathroom, he checks the stalls. Empty. He goes to the sink and splashes water on his face. He catches sight of his reflection and starts giggling again because he looks insane. He takes a couple of deep breaths and tries to concentrate.

A fashion show?

Yes.

Well, that clears that up, Dustin thinks, without meaning to send that thought. Why do you need a fashion show?

Hopper says I can go to the Snow Ball.

That's awesome! But why don't you want to tell Mike?

It's a surprise. And in case...

In case Hop changes his mind?

Yes. He can feel the relief in that thought, and it's fucking weird. This whole experience is fucking weird. And fucking awesome.

Okay. And you don't know what to wear?

No. I need a dress.

Okay. Okay then. We'll get you a dress.

Thank you.

Anytime.

And...? She starts, but his thought interrupts hers.

And it will be our secret. Don't worry. We'll ditch Mike and come over after school, okay?

Thank you.

He's not sure what the proper etiquette is for ending mental communication. It's not like you can just hang up, can you?

No, but I can, she thinks at him, and he giggles again. She tells him she'll see him after school. And then she's gone. Just as easily as she came. He can feel it, the lack of her in his mind. It's a really fucking weird feeling, because he had almost gotten used to her presence. He splashes some more water on his face and slowly makes his way back to class. He carefully avoids eye contact with any of his friends, even though he can feel them watching him curiously. Looking at any of them would just get him going again.

When the bell rings, Dustin speeds out of class and to his locker. His friends are hot on his trail.

"What the fuck was that?" Lucas asks in bewilderment.

“Nothing! I just thought of something funny.”

“What?”

“You wouldn’t get it,” Dustin says, shoving books into his locker.

“Uh, okay. Whatever.” Lucas rolls his eyes.

“AV club?” Mike asks. Shit. It’s Wednesday. Although pretty much any day is an AV club kind of day, they always visit the new Hamshack every Wednesday.

Dustin slams his locker. “No!” He bellows before the others can agree. They all stare at him. “We can’t! Remember, guys? We have that thing.” He glares at Lucas and Will.

Lucas is no fucking help whatsoever. “What thing? It’s Wednesday.”

“That thing! You guys said you’d help. Remember?”

“No.”

Dustin sighs but Will picks up the slack. Thank God. “Oh yeah, I forgot.”

“Forgot what?” Mike asks him in confusion. Why is everyone acting so weird?

“Um. My mom needs help at the store. And they said they’d help?” Will phrases it as a question and Dustin nods in enthusiasm.

“Oh. Okay. No problem,” Mike says. “I’ll help, too.”

“No! You can’t.”

Mike stops walking. “I can’t? Why?”

“Um. Mom didn’t want you to help,” Will tells him feebly.

“Why?” The hurt is unmistakable and Will grimaces.

“Because. Um. You’re clumsy. You knocked over the nativity scene and broke Joseph,” Will improvises, and looks to Dustin for help

again.

“Yeah. Sorry, man. She just couldn’t take that kind of chance again.”

Mike stares at them all, open-mouthed. Lucas is bewildered and Will looks abashed.

“Oh. Is she mad? I offered to pay for it.”

“No! She isn’t mad. But her boss is in today and she just doesn’t want anything to happen. I’m sorry,” Will finishes lamely.

Mike studies their faces. Dustin looks nonchalant, Lucas bewildered, and Will has a too-innocent expression on his face that Mike recognizes instantly. He knows they’re up to something. Again. And he knows he’ll find out eventually, so he gives up. Sighs. “Oh. Okay, then. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow,” Mike tells them, before abruptly walking away. He doesn’t even bother going to his locker.

“Shit. He looks like a sad little puppy,” Dustin says, staring after him.

“Well, what was I supposed to say?” Will asks him heatedly.

“What the hell are both of you talking about?”

“We had to ditch Mike.”

“Uh, yeah. I gathered that. Why?”

“Eleven needs help.”

Will looks unsurprised, but Lucas gapes at him. “How do you know?”

“She told me.”

“When? Was she here?” Lucas looks around as if she’s lurking nearby.

“No. In class.”

“In your mind?”

“Yep.”

Lucas stares at him speechlessly.

“Yep,” Dustin repeats.

“Is she okay? What does she need help with?”

“She’s fine,” Dustin reassures them, and briefly explains, without mentioning the words fashion show. Lucas is still a little sensitive about that particular phrase. Will laughs but Lucas is mutinous.

“We gave up the Hamshack to go shopping? Clothes shopping? Dress shopping?” The outrage in his voice makes them both wince. “What about Mrs. Byers? Or Nancy?” He doesn’t mention Hopper, because the image of Hopper helping pick out a dress is completely alien and just fucking weird.

“One of our party requires assistance,” Dustin tells him in a solemn voice. Lucas sighs and shrugs.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Dustin beams at him and claps him on the back.

Half an hour later, Dustin strides confidently into the police station. He smiles at everyone and waves as he passes them. Most of them ignore him.

“How can I help you, dear?” Flo asks. She knows Dustin; she’s known his mother for years. She helped Claudia search for the still missing Mews.

“Hi, Flo. Is Hopper here? I mean, is the Chief here?”

“He is, but he’s very busy right now,” she says and he snorts. Yeah, right.

“I’ll tell you what. I bet he’ll see me. Tell him I’m here,” he says importantly, and takes a seat. He laces his arms behind his head and waits. She laughs a little at his bravado before knocking on Hopper’s door.

“I’m swamped, Flo,” he says immediately. She opens the door and

shakes her head. He's reading a book, feet up on his desk.

"Hopper. Someone here to see you."

"Take a message." Hopper turns a page.

"He says you'll want to see him."

Hopper doesn't even look up. "Is that right? Who is it?"

"Dustin Henderson."

Hopper closes the book and removes his feet from the desk. He grabs a battered pack of cigarettes and lights up.

"Send him in."

Flo looks at him curiously, but he waves her away. She rolls her eyes and leans over to take the cigarette from him, but he cups his hand around it protectively. She sighs. Gives up. For the moment, anyway.

"The Chief will see you now," she tells Dustin, and he positively twinkles at her. She laughs.

"I thought he would." She points him in the right direction and watches him swagger down the hall.

Dustin looks around with interest. Hopper's office is a lot like his house. Cluttered and smoky. Depressing. Dustin theatrically waves the smoke out of his face.

"What do you need?"

Dustin closes the door and Hopper takes that as a bad sign. He drops the cigarette in his coffee.

"Is she okay?" Hopper asks him urgently. His face is suddenly tense and there's a little vein throbbing in his forehead. Dustin watches the throbbing with interest and barely hears the question.

"Who?"

"Eleven," Hopper whispers.

“Oh. Yeah. Totally. She’s fine.”

Hopper sighs and leans back. Lights another cigarette.

“Then what are you doing here?” He asks, a lot more curtly this time.

“I need money.”

“Money? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Fraid not, Hop.” Hopper just glares at him until he elaborates.
“Well, I don’t need money, but she does.”

“For what, exactly?”

“To go shopping.”

“Shopping?”

“Yep.”

“And I repeat my question. For what, exactly?”

Dustin sighs. “Are you seriously this dense?” He quickly amends the question when Hopper glowers. “I mean, you said she could go to the Snow Ball. So she needs a dress.”

“A dress.”

“Uh, yeah. She can’t exactly go in her overalls, you know.”

Hopper runs a hand over his face. He’s suddenly exhausted. Conversations with Dustin tend to leave him feeling that way. “Yeah. I am aware of that.”

“So! Money, please.” Dustin holds out a hand and waits expectantly.

“Where is she?”

“Oh. Right outside.”

Hopper stares at him in disbelief.

"She's hidden! Don't worry. That's why I came in." He makes a heroic effort not to roll his eyes and succeeds. Almost.

"How are you going to get there, exactly?"

"Get where?"

"Wherever the dress is."

"Well, we don't know where the dress is, do we? Not until we find it," Dustin tells him reasonably. Hopper sighs again and he relents. "We're going to ride our bikes. Well, we'll ride our bikes, and she'll double."

"We?"

"Yeah. Lucas, Will, me. We."

"Not Mike?"

"No. She wants to keep it a surprise, in case you change your mind again," Dustin tells him bluntly.

The two stare at each other.

"Let me get this straight. You, and Will, and Lucas want to go dress shopping. For Eleven." He forgets to call Eleven her.

"Yeah?"

"Dress shopping."

"Yep."

Hopper surprises him by laughing. Dustin looks so jovial about the whole thing. They aren't normal 12 year old boys, that's for damned sure. He would have never even approached a dress at the age of 12. Let alone spend an afternoon, on a school night, when all free time is precious, picking one out. They are good friends. They make him exhausted, but there's no denying they are good friends. The best.

Hopper's looking at him almost fondly and it's a lot scarier than his

glower, to be honest. Dustin was fine with the glowers. He's used to the glowers. He likes the glowers. He misses the glowers. The fond look is freaking him out.

Hopper leans over and drags his battered wallet out of his pocket. He examines the contents.

"How much is a dress?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Right." Hopper sighs. He hands Dustin an impressive amount of money. Dustin gawks at the bills in his hand.

"I want change."

"Right."

"A lot of it."

"Okay."

"And a receipt."

"Sure."

"And order a pizza or something." Assuming there's anything left.

"Cool. Thanks, Hopper." Dustin tucks the money into his wallet and turns toward the door.

"Dustin?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful." Keep her safe, is what he means, and Dustin knows it.

Dustin smiles at him. It's a kind smile, and a little pitying. "We will. Although it would actually be the other way around."

"True. Okay, go. I'm busy. Very important work to do." Hopper picks the book up and his feet are back on the desk. Dustin laughs and Hopper gives him a rare smile before shooing him out the door with

one hand.

There are dresses everywhere. Hundreds of dresses. She didn't know this many dresses even existed. Lucas and Dustin and Will are gaping, too. Jesus Christ. She looks at them uncertainly, but there's no help there, not this time. They are all staring at each other uncertainly.

Dustin figures they should just dive in. Roll with it. He's good at that. He grabs the first dress he sees and holds it up. It's huge.

"That's a maternity dress, numbnuts," Lucas tells him.

"Oh." Dustin tosses it onto the floor.

"What's a maternity dress?" Eleven asks. Lucas scratches his ear and the boys look at each other awkwardly.

"That's what pregnant ladies wear," Dustin answers finally.

"Pregnant?"

Jesus. "Women who are going to have a baby," Will says gently.

"Oh." And mercifully, that's it. Thank God. Lucas steers them toward the teen section. He hopes that he doesn't see anyone he knows. Or will ever know, actually. Luckily, the section is empty, because it's a school day.

Dustin grabs a dress randomly off the rack. "What about this?"

They all stare at it. None of them know the first thing about dresses.

"It's yellow," Will says, trying to be helpful.

"Yep. Yellow. And it has lace," Lucas adds. Dustin rolls his eyes and lobs the dress toward the rack. It lands on the floor.

"I don't think you're a yellow kind of person, El," he tells her, looking at her thoughtfully.

"No?" She's never considered what kind of color person she was before.

“Nope.”

“Pink?” Will hands Dustin another dress, since Dustin has appointed himself Maestro of this expedition. Dustin holds it up to her and squints at her critically.

“Maybe. Add it to the pile.”

“We don’t have a pile.”

“We do now, jackass,” Dustin snaps, and tosses the dress at him. Lucas steps back to avoid touching it and they all watch it drift to the floor.

“Lucas.”

“What?”

“Pick up the dress.”

“You pick it up.”

“I was just holding it. Come on.”

“No.”

“Being a man means not being afraid of things like this. You have to be secure in your masculinity,” Dustin tells him wisely, and Lucas snorts. “Pick it up.”

“No.”

“Touch it.”

“Jesus Christ. FINE.” Lucas bends down to pick up the dress and holds it awkwardly. Eleven is giggling. They are all giggling, even Lucas.

Thirty minutes later, the pile has grown considerably. The pile on the floor has also grown considerably and a couple of clerks are glaring at them. Dustin doesn’t notice, because he’s getting into it now. He’s almost reluctant when Lucas calls a halt to the fun.

“What? Why?”

“I can’t even see over these fucking dresses,” Lucas mumbles. It’s true; the pile obscures his face completely. They laugh again. Will scouts around for a fitting room.

“There,” Will points. He grabs some of the dresses from Lucas when they start to slide. The outer-room has a row of chairs. Will motions Eleven to the actual changing rooms in the inner-room, and she hesitates. Her friends are staying well behind the line in between the rooms, near the chairs. She looks at them curiously.

“This is a girl’s changing room,” Will says, pointing to the inner-room. “We have to stay here, in the chairs.”

“The boyfriend chairs,” Dustin adds. He sees his friend’s faces. “What? I see movies. Jesus.” Thank God Eleven understands the privacy thing now, he thinks, remembering the first time they met. They hand her a stack of dresses. Some of them are duplicates, because none of them (including Eleven) know her size.

“If they fit, then you come back out here, wearing the dress, okay? Then we’ll have a fashion show.” Dustin waves his hand over Lucas’s spluttering protests. “We have to have a fashion show. She helped you guys. Jesus.”

“But we didn’t want a fashion show-!”

“Shut up, Lucas. Will was totally into it.”

Will stops Eleven before she retreats. “Will you be okay?” He asks her quietly. He knows about her claustrophobia. She nods. The rooms are bright. Very bright. They aren’t like the dark room in the lab at all. She will be okay. She smiles at him and he returns it.

Lucas and Dustin rifle through comics while they wait. Will rests his head on the wall. They hear the flip of the lock and Dustin drops his comic.

“Wait for me to announce you!” He hears her giggle and turns to Lucas. “You could really learn something about her attitude, Sinclair.” Lucas whacks him with the comic. He ignores it. “Okay,

here she is, walking down the aisle-“

Lucas cuts him off. “Walking down the aisle? She’s not getting married. Jesus.”

Dustin is unruffled. “Not yet, but I seriously thought he’d ask her that before he asked her to the Snow Ball.” They both laugh. He stops when he sees Eleven.

“You look like a birthday cake,” he tells her, pleased. “In a good way. A delicious birthday cake.” That doesn’t come out the way he intends, judging from the expression on Will’s face. Oh well. She hasn’t noticed anything amiss.

“I don’t know, it has, like, ruffles and shit,” Lucas says, staring at the dress. Eleven looks down at it. It’s true, there are ruffles. A lot of ruffles. And it’s scratchy. She pulls the collar away from her neck slightly.

“And it’s pink,” Will adds, because apparently he’s only good for naming the actual color of the dress.

“Maybe it’s too...girly?” Lucas asks.

They all stare at him in confusion, because dresses are for girls. They are, by definition, girly. Dustin thinks it over and nods slowly. “Yeah. Mike liked you with a shaved head.” Eleven is still staring at him and he backtracks quickly. “Not that he doesn’t like you now. With hair. I’m just saying, maybe this one is a little much.”

“I had a pink dress then.”

“Yeah. But this one is like, shiny and shit. And the ruffles.” Dustin looks around for support, and Lucas nods vehemently.

Eleven gives a little shrug and retreats.

They go back to their comics until the lock clicks again. Dustin presses one hand against his ear like he’s commentating into a headset at a sports game. “Here she is, the model so famous she only needs one name,” and Lucas cuts him off. Again.

“Although she has three.”

“Three?”

“Yeah. Eleven, Eleanor, Jane. Three.”

“And El,” Will adds.

“Four then.”

“SHUT UP. You guys are like, seriously fucking with my flow, here.” He tries to resume but he’s missed his chance, because she’s standing in front of him again. He looks at her carefully. “Can you twirl?” She laughs and twirls quickly. “Let me consult the judges.” He beckons them to lean their heads in.

“Better than the pink one,” Lucas says.

“It’s green.”

“No shit, Byers.”

“Dark green,” Will adds, eyes twinkling. Dustin rolls his eyes and looks back at Eleven.

“Can you twirl again?” She complies.

There’s a huge bow on the back of the dress. It’s revolting. “No. God no. No bows.” Dustin cries, shuddering. Will shrugs but Lucas is nodding emphatically.

“The judges would like to see the next dress,” Lucas tells her, and she laughs again. Dustin looks pleased that he’s finally participating. And Dustin’s even more impressed when he continues with enthusiasm, for the next million or so dresses. Dustin’s lost count, honestly. Some of them are okay. But too many of them have fucking bows or ruffles or lace or even more than one bow. And ruffles and lace. Who the hell designs these dresses? One of them falls to her ankles like a nun’s habit, and it’s awful, but at least it doesn’t have any fucking bows.

“I’m hungry,” Will whispers at one point. Lucas shushes him immediately and Will gapes at him. Lucas is actually enjoying this, he

can tell. Before he can say a word, the lock clicks. Dustin straightens.

“Okay, as I said before, the model that’s so famous, she only needs one name-that’s one fucking name, Lucas, so shut the hell up-the girl who could blow your mind-and she could really do that, like literally-Eleven!” Will and Lucas are giggling at his commentating. Lucas shakes with laughter and his comic slides to the floor. Will leans over to snag it but misses because he’s crying with laughter. They don’t even notice Eleven standing in front of them. Dustin looks at her first and sobers immediately.

“Wow,” he says. She smiles and her eyes, usually so solemn, light up. A horrible thought occurs to Dustin. “Twirl! Now!” He says it urgently and she twirls immediately. Thank God. No fucking bows. It’s amazing how such a tiny thing can ruin a whole dress.

“Pretty,” Lucas tells her truthfully, and she smiles again.

“Judges, if you please.” Dustin motions them into a huddle.

“Well?” Dustin whispers. And then immediately, before Will can do more than open his mouth, Dustin says, “Yes, I know. I know it’s fucking blue. With polka dots. And a goddamned belt. Okay?”

Will laughs. He gives a thumbs-up, and Dustin nods before turning to Lucas. They exchange meaningful eye contact. Dustin breaks it and turns back to Eleven.

“We have a winner!” He tells her happily. Then a thought occurs to him. “I mean, if you like this one best. Some of the others were okay.” Just please, not one with bows.

“I like this one,” she says. And she does. She liked this one before they even saw it. It’s pretty. And it makes her feel pretty, too.

Dustin cheers. “Okay, take a victory lap.” She gives him a blank look.

“What’s a victory lap?”

“Just walk around like you won something, and you’re happy about it.” She laughs and strolls around the room. They applaud and Lucas whistles.

“Can we eat now?” Lucas asks. Now that they’re finished, he’s done. Eleven starts to exit the room but Will pulls her back.

“Wait. You have to change back into your other clothes. The regular ones. Then we’ll take this one and pay for it.”

“Oh.” She turns around immediately and walks back into the dressing room. Dustin grabs the comics and shoves them into his backpack.

“Now we just need to burn that fucking suit of Mike’s so he doesn’t look like a complete jackass.” Lucas and Will nod in agreement.

A few minute later, they’re making their way to the door and arguing over where to eat. They are all starving. Dress shopping is exhausting. Fun, but exhausting.

“Shit.” Will stops by the door and they all look at him in surprise, because Will rarely curses.

“What?”

“Shoes.”

Shit.

The night of the Snow Ball, the guys are gathered at the Hopper household. The guys sans Mike, anyway. It’s hours before the dance, but they decided to help Eleven get ready first. They figure (based on careful studying of movies and TV shows) that it takes longer for a girl to prepare. When they are finished with Eleven, they will head home and theoretically still have plenty of time to beautify themselves, to use Dustin’s expression. Dustin’s a little uncertain on this point, because his hair might take a little longer than expected. He hasn’t tried out the Farrah Fawcett stuff yet. In retrospect, maybe he should have practiced. Oh well. It can’t be that hard. Steve does it every day, for Christ’s sake. Besides, Eleven’s a little nervous. She needs the assistance of the party, and the party is ready to help.

Hopper isn’t home yet, so the guys make themselves comfortable on the couch while they wait. Dustin is trying to pet all of the kittens at once. He hasn’t seen them in awhile and they are fucking adorable.

"I think your mom's rubbing off on you," Lucas says, watching Dustin cuddle the kittens to his chest. Dustin ignores him.

"You have my permission to steal that one's food," Dustin mutters to the Dustin kitten, while pointing at the Lucas kitten. The kitten yawns. Lucas rolls his eyes and throws a pillow at him. Dustin protectively cradles the kittens.

"El? You okay?" Will calls to the closed door.

"Yes."

Will shrugs at the guys, but before he can try again, the door opens. Eleven steps out shyly.

"Still pretty," Will tells her, since she's a little hesitant. Dustin isn't sure why she looks so timid, she looks the same as she did during the fashion show. Except her shoes are different. She looks at them solemnly, a question in her eyes. Lucas and Dustin turn to Will, since Mike isn't here to interpret. Will meets her gaze but he doesn't understand. Not this time.

"What's wrong?"

One hand goes to her cheek and pats it gently, looking him in the eyes to see if he understands.

"Oh." He does.

"Oh, what?" Lucas asks them both.

"Makeup," Will explains.

"Oh. Right."

"Do you have any makeup?" Dustin asks her. Eleven shakes her head.

The guys look at each other, flummoxed.

"Does Hopper have any makeup?" Lucas asks, without even thinking about it. Dustin hits him.

“Dumbass.”

“Well, he’s had girlfriends, right? Maybe they left some?”

Dustin retracts his hand before he can hit him again. “Fair point. Let’s raid the medicine cabinet.” He scrambles up and runs for the bathroom, Lucas on his heels.

“Anything?” Will calls a few minutes later.

“Hopper has medication for everything. Seriously. Pills everywhere,” Dustin calls back.

“I meant, any makeup?”

“Oh. No.”

They return to the living room forlornly.

“I guess we could buy some?”

Lucas glares at him. “I’m not buying makeup, Dustin.”

“A real man wouldn’t be afraid to—” Lucas hits him before he can finish.

“Fine. Whatever. Jesus. Do we know any girls?” He looks at Eleven. “Besides you, I mean.”

“Max?” Lucas offers.

“Nah. She probably doesn’t have any.” Dustin glances at Will.

“My mom doesn’t wear that much makeup,” he says immediately.

Dustin sighs.

“Nancy.” Eleven says it decisively. Dustin’s eyes light up.

“Yes! Nancy has makeup. A shit-ton of makeup.”

“Yeah, but how are we going to get it? The whole point is to keep this a secret from the Wheeler family, remember?”

They all look at each other bleakly until Will smiles.

Lucas knocks on the basement door and lets himself in after waiting a polite quarter of a second. Mike's moping on the couch, as expected. He looks up as Lucas lets himself in.

"Hey."

"Hey."

Mike waits, but Lucas just stares at him.

"What's up?"

"Uh. I just came over to make sure you weren't wearing that suit to the dance." It's only half a lie. It's not why he's here, but he sure as hell needs to check before letting his friend out in public.

"I'm not going," Mike says, flopping back onto the couch.

This is also not unexpected, but it is annoying. Lucas grits his teeth.

"Uh, yeah. You are. You have to keep Dustin company, remember? And Will still isn't sure if he has a date or not," Lucas adds, rolling his eyes. Mike sighs.

"Fine. I'll just wear jeans, though."

"Michael." Mike meets Lucas's gaze, startled. Only Dustin calls him Michael, usually when he's about a second away from throwing something at him.

"Look. El can't come, and that sucks. But at least put on some decent clothes and like, make an effort. She wouldn't want you to be miserable."

Lucas seizes Mike's arm and pulls him off the couch. He feels not one iota of guilt at the crestfallen expression on his friend's face. He'll get over it as soon as he sees El.

As soon as they're in Mike's room, he walks to the window and gestures. Mike doesn't notice, he's gazing into his closet again. Lucas

sighs. He is really getting fucking sick of clothes and outfits and more clothes, but he tells himself it will be worth it. He reaches past Mike's shoulder and pulls out a sweater.

Will walks quickly around the house and lets himself in the front door as soon as he sees Lucas give the signal. He walks as quietly as possible up the stairs, because the other Wheelers are in the living room, talking and eating dinner. They don't even notice him pass. A few minutes later and he's in Nancy's room. He shuts the door quietly and glances around guiltily. He tells himself it's for a very good cause as he rifles through her dresser. She has a lot of makeup. A lot. There are lipsticks, pink tubes of something gunky and black, pink things, brown things, blue things. Makeup of all colors. He stares at the tubes, containers and packets helplessly. Do girls wear all of this? All at once? And why are there so many colors? He opens a tube of lipstick. Pink. He compares it to another tube. Also pink. He switches on Nancy's lamp and examines them more closely. They look exactly the same, even after a few minutes of careful squinting.

He shrugs and tosses them both into his backpack, along with anything else that looks remotely useful. It's not stealing, exactly. He'll bring it back. He's almost to the door when he sees a bunch of hair stuff. Hair makeup? He's not really sure what you'd call it. He grabs a bottle and looks at it. Styling gel. That sounds promising. It goes in the backpack, too. There's also a curling iron. He picks it up and mentally debates with himself. She will most likely notice the disappearance of this, if nothing else. But maybe El would like it? He sits it carefully on the dresser and backs away. Hesitates. Lunges for it and shoves it into his backpack.

"What the hell are you doing?" A sharp voice asks him.

Will jumps and drops the backpack. A lifetime's supply of makeup rolls out. He bends down to pick some of it up, anything to save him from responding. A lipstick comes to rest near Nancy's shoe and he grabs it. He looks up guiltily. Nancy doesn't look angry, exactly. Just surprised and baffled.

"Um."

Nancy waits, arms folded across her chest. She raises her eyebrows at

him and he turns red. She gives him a minute but he doesn't say anything, he just hangs his head.

"Why are you stealing my stuff?" Nancy grabs the lipstick from him and looks at it. "Why are you stealing my makeup?"

"I'm not stealing," Will mumbles, avoiding eye contact.

"You have a backpack full of my stuff. That looks like stealing to me."

"I, um. Um. I was just going to borrow it."

"You wanted to borrow my makeup?"

Will turns an even deeper shade of red but doesn't answer. She's used to her brother's friends sneaking into her room and getting into things-she remembers Dustin eating her lipstick once-but it's been years since it's happened. Except for last year, for Eleven. Eleven.

Nancy shuts the door quickly.

"Eleven?" She whispers, and Will's startled eyes meet hers. He waits for a minute, and then gives her a tiny nod. She laughs.

"I'm guessing my brother doesn't know, right?"

"She wanted to surprise him."

Nancy refrains from cooing or anything similar, although the two of them are freaking adorable.

"Are you guys all in on it?"

"Yeah. We helped her pick out a dress, but we forgot the makeup."

That's it. Nancy can't help cooing this time. More than anything, she wishes she had been a witness to her brother's friends picking out a dress. So freaking adorable. She gives Will a little hug, she can't resist. He blushes again. She swiftly bends down and sorts through the spilled makeup.

"She won't need this, that's not her color at all," Nancy mutters absently. She looks up at Will. "What color's her dress?"

Will grins a little. Finally, his expertise is needed. "Blue. With purple polka-dots."

Nancy sorts through the rest of the makeup quickly, tossing a few things back into his backpack. She moves to her dresser and rummages for some hair clips. She hands them to Will, who can't believe his good fortune.

"That should do it. Uh, does she know how to put any of this on?"

Will shrugs. "I guess so," he says vaguely. Don't all girls just know how to do the makeup thing? Maybe it's instinct? Nancy reads his face and laughs.

"If she has any problems, call me, okay?"

"Thanks, Nancy."

Will zips up his backpack and walks toward the door, before looking at the curling iron again. Nancy follows his gaze. She laughs again.

"Go on, take it. I can use my mom's. Just remember, use the styling stuff after, not before. And don't leave each piece of hair in for too long. Actually, when you get to that part, call me and I'll talk you through it," Nancy amends, because she can see them burning Eleven's short hair completely off. Will nods and waves before quietly leaving. Eleven rocked the almost bald look last year, but Nancy has a feeling Eleven would prefer to have hair. Although, she does have a wig Eleven could borrow if the worst happened. Nancy giggles, thinking of her Christmas present.

Eleven and Dustin are playing Tic-Tac-Toe when the boys burst in. Will waves his backpack triumphantly.

"Got it!" He thrusts the backpack at her and she takes it.

"Thank you."

"No problem. There's all kinds of stuff, and a curling iron, but don't

use that yet.”

“Curling iron?” Eleven asks.

“Um. To make your hair curl. I think.”

“Her hair already curls,” Dustin tells him.

“Well, whatever. Girls use it anyway. I don’t know,” Will says, aggrieved.

Eleven dumps the backpack out and makeup rolls everywhere. The kittens go nuts chasing after the various tubes and containers. Eleven picks up something round and looks at it. Opens it. It’s pink. She’s suddenly aware that her friends are all watching her expectantly, so she glances up. They stare at her and she stares back.

Dustin’s waiting for her to put the makeup on, but she doesn’t make any move to do so. He slaps his hand over his eyes. We are fucking idiots. Clearly she doesn’t know what to do, because Mike put makeup on her last year. Mike, who has an older sister. None of them have older sisters. He glances at his friends and sees they’re all wearing similar expressions.

“Oh,” Will says. Maybe he should have let Nancy help after all.

“I guess we could give it a try?” Dustin says, picking up the nearest container of makeup and sitting cross-legged on the floor.

“Give it a try? Are you serious? This shit looks complicated,” Lucas says, looking at a pair of eyelash curlers. They look lethal to him.

“It can’t be that hard! Mike did it last year.”

“Mike has an older sister,” Lucas retorts, echoing Dustin’s earlier thoughts.

“Whatever. We have plenty of time. El, sit here,” Dustin pats the floor in front of him. Eleven sits.

Will watches anxiously as Dustin whips out a compact of eyeshadow. Dustin looks confident, but Dustin almost always looks confident.

Will knows it usually means he doesn't know what the hell he's actually doing.

"Close your eyes, El," Dustin says, before drawing the little brush over her eyelid. It goes on weird. It's really dark in one spot and lighter right next to it. He glances at Lucas, but Lucas shrugs. "Why the fuck won't this stuff spread?" Dustin asks. He dips it into the eyeshadow again and tries to coat the brush before attempting it again. Now she has perfect dots of color on her eyelids. It looks interesting, but probably not the look she's going for. If only the dots would just fucking smear a little. He tentatively licks a fingertip and stretches it out to her face, but Lucas grabs his arm.

"Jesus. That's disgusting."

"What? I just need to wet it a little."

"I don't think you're supposed to be wetting it!"

"How do you know?"

"Shut up."

"You shut up."

"Both of you shut up, I'm on the phone," Will says unexpectedly. They all glance over, including Eleven. Her eye starts watering because Dustin accidentally pokes her with the brush.

"Sorry! Sorry, El," Dustin says.

"I'm okay."

Lucas hands her his bandana while glaring at Dustin and she wipes her streaming eyes with it.

"Thank you."

"Who are you calling? And why aren't you doing this? You're the artistic one; it can't be that different than drawing and coloring. You just need to color on her face instead of paper," Dustin calls.

"I'm calling Nancy. We need backup. Don't worry, El, she won't tell Mike, okay?"

Eleven nods. She knows now, they need Nancy's help. Badly.

"You have to use a primer first," Will calls to Dustin.

"Primer? Like when you paint a house?"

Lucas is rifling through the compacts. He hands one to Dustin. Dustin shrugs.

"Close your eyes again," he tells Eleven, before wiping her eyes clean and trying again. Practice makes perfect.

They all take a turn, with Nancy instructing over the phone. It's not that hard, Lucas thinks. Kind of like a paint by number kit. They aren't touching the eyeliner, because Nancy forbid it. Lucas spreads a little blush on his brush.

"Sweep it from her ear down her cheekbone to her mouth, gently."

"I thought it had to do with the apple of her cheek or something?" Lucas asks.

"What the fuck is that?" Dustin asks.

"I don't know." It's just something he heard his mom say once. He sweeps the brush gently down her face.

Ten minutes later, they are all studying her while she looks at herself in the mirror.

"I think she looks good," Will says.

"Yeah, not bad for our first time," Dustin agrees.

"El? You like it?" Lucas asks.

"Pretty," she says. They laugh.

"What about the curling iron?" Lucas asks, but Will shakes his head.

“Nancy said we’d burn her hair off. She said just to use the styling stuff.”

Lucas slaps the tube into Will’s waiting palm, like a nurse handing the surgeon a scalpel.

Two hours later, Eleven is nervously waiting in Hopper’s station wagon. She’s not sure why she’s nervous. She’s not even aware that it’s nervousness. She just feels funny in her stomach. Fluttery. Part of it is due to the location. The gym. She remembers the last time she was in the gym. In the bath. And then, after, when the Bad Men came looking for her. The majority of the fluttery feeling is because of Mike. She often gets the fluttery feeling with Mike. It’s a confusing feeling, because it’s a good feeling. Sometimes.

Will taps on the window, and Hopper unlocks the door. He steps out briefly, ostensibly to have a smoke. Will slides in behind the driver’s seat and smiles at the Chief before turning to his friend.

“You okay?” He asks her, because she seems terrified and ecstatic all at the same time.

“Yes,” she answers. She looks at her friend closely. “Are you?”

He laughs. “Yeah. I’ll be okay.”

She waits for a second. “Mike?”

“He’s inside; Lucas is making sure he stays put. Don’t worry. He says to tell you good luck.”

They smile at each other.

“I’ll see you inside in a few minutes, okay? At 7:40.” He cracks the door and starts to slide out, but her hand on his shoulder stops him. She hugs him as hard as she can, considering they’re blocked by the gearshift. She wishes Dustin and Lucas were here, too. Since they aren’t, she tries to hug Will enough for all of them. He hugs her back.

“Thank you,” she says.

“Thank you,” he tells her seriously, looking into her eyes, and her

smile fades a bit because he sounds so solemn. She studies his eyes. She knows what he means. He's talking about the Upside Down. About the Demogorgon. About closing the gate. It's the only time they've spoken of it, even indirectly.

"Friends are people you would do anything for," she tells him, quoting her other friends, the first time she learned about friendship. Will grins at her and hugs her again before gently letting her go and sliding out of the car. She waits for a few minutes, while Hopper finishes smoking, thinking of her friends. Thinking of how happy she is. How lucky. It's something she's never felt before. Something she thought she never would feel, but she feels it now. She has friends. Awesome friends. She knows now, makeup and dresses are not normal for boys, but she also knows they care enough about her to help her anyway. Because they are good friends, her friends. And she has Mike, who is her best friend and also more than a friend. And Mike is waiting for her, even if he doesn't know it yet.

Mike doesn't know it. Mike has no clue. He's sitting in one of the cheap plastic chairs and watching his friends dance. Even Dustin is dancing, with Nancy. Dustin looks like he's on top of the world. Mike envies the feeling, if not the dance partner. He's not sulking, exactly. He's just sad. More than sad, actually. He passed sad a few emotions ago. The song is playing, the same one he played for Eleven when she was missing. He thinks of it as their song. He wishes she were here to hear it with him. To dance to it with him, because he promised. He promised her twice. He wishes, more than anything, that she could be here. Even if it's just a cheesy school dance, it's also everything. Or at least it feels that way, right now, watching his friends dance. He's almost ready to leave. He will leave, pretty soon. His friends can't argue with that, he made an appearance. Maybe he'll get a ride to Eleven's, so he can at least see her tonight. Even though he intends to stand up and leave, he doesn't move an inch. Something, some instinct, is telling him to stay.

Eleven hears the song, too. She hears the song because Will requested it for her. Her friends had mentioned the DJ, who will play any song you want. Will was very excited about the DJ. She had asked Will to play this song for her. For Mike. For both of them. She planned to walk in the door when the song started, at 7-4-0. It's the time Mike

always called her, when she was gone. It's 7-4-4 and she is late. A different song is playing now. The clock in Hopper's car was wrong. It's okay, though. She doesn't mind. Mike heard the song, and she will see him right after it ends. That's almost as good.

Mike watches his friends dance, until he gets that feeling. The magnet feeling Eleven sometimes gets. He doesn't completely understand the feeling, not yet, but he obeys the instinct and glances at the door at the same moment it opens and a girl walks in. Not just a girl. Eleven. Here. He's both completely stunned and also not surprised at all. The magnet feeling. She's looking around the gym. She could have found him in an instant, he knows, but he can tell she's overwhelmed by the sheer amount of people in the room.

He rises from the chair, mouth slightly open. She looks beautiful. But then, she always looks beautiful. At the same moment, her head turns and her eyes lock with his. She looks nervous and exhilarated and solemn all at once. She gives him a half-smile and walks toward him, but he's already moving toward her. They meet in the middle of the gym, which suddenly seems completely empty except for the two of them. She never takes her eyes off his face.

She's right in front of him now, and he's not sure what to say. Any normal type of greeting wouldn't feel right, not for this moment. Instead, he opens his mouth and tells her the only thing he's actually thinking right now.

"You look beautiful."

Eleven looks down shyly. She's a little pink, because she knows what beautiful means. It means more than pretty. Much more than pretty. And she can see in his eyes, he believes it. She can feel him gazing at her so she meets his eyes again and smiles. He smiles back at her.

He can't believe she's really here, right in front of him. Finally. He hasn't felt this happy since the night she returned. He looks at her for a moment, remembering his promise from last year. Now he gets to keep it.

"You wanna dance?" He asks it with no hesitation whatsoever, which amazes him. It took him weeks to be able to ask her to the Snow Ball

(and that was only because of Dustin's interference) but now that they're here together, it's easy. Natural and right, somehow. Just like it was last year between them. He doesn't even hear the music, wouldn't be able to say if any music is playing right now or not. It doesn't matter.

She meets his gaze, a little shyly. "I...don't know how," she confesses.

He smiles again. "I don't either," he tells her honestly. "Do you want to figure it out?" Together, he means. Do you want to figure it out together?

She smiles her half-smile, the one that he loves, and nods. He takes her hand and leads her to the middle of the dance floor without another word. He takes the hand he's holding, and her free hand, and gently places them on his shoulders.

"I think...you do it like this."

She moves her hands slightly, feeling his jacket under her fingers. It's soft.

"Yeah, like that," he says softly, and they both smile. He starts to sway and she follows his lead. He can't believe his luck, to be here with her. To be with her at all. He's so happy and grateful to be here with her, to be holding her; he's almost forgiven Hopper completely. Eleven smiles at him again and all thoughts of Hopper instantly evaporate. Her eyes are beautiful.

She has that look on her face, the look she only has for him. The one Will once drew for him, the one he was terrified of forgetting when she was gone. He knows now, he doesn't need a picture of that look. He'll never forget it. He'll never forget the way her eyes light up when she looks at him. He watches her seriously, drinking her in with his eyes. Her face is tilted slightly toward him, and without even thinking about it, he leans in and kisses her. When they break apart he watches her face. She lowers her head and turns pink. Smiles at him. She rests her forehead against his and he smiles into her hair.

It's sappy and cheesy and he doesn't care. It's perfect.

When the song ends, he's disappointed. They both are. There will be more songs, he thinks. The dance is just getting started.

Good.

He meets her eyes and laughs. She grins back at him. A real grin. He takes her hand again and she laces her fingers through his.

"Come on, I'll show you our table," Mike says. Lucas and Max are talking to each other across the room, but Will and Dustin are already waiting. Dustin glances up at them both.

"Hey guys," he says, and Mike looks at his face. Looks at Will. Neither one of them show even the slightest expression of surprise on seeing Eleven here.

"You guys knew?" He asks, laughing. He pulls Eleven's chair out for her and she sits.

"Of course we knew, dumbass," Dustin tells him breezily. "Hey, El. Awesome dress. And awesome makeup. Someone really talented must have helped with that," he jokes, and she laughs.

Mike doesn't get it, but he's not really paying attention, either. He's staring at Eleven. Dustin rolls his eyes. "Cookie?" he offers. She accepts one with her free hand. Her other hand is entwined with Mike's.

Will hands them both a cup of punch.

"You having a good time?" Will asks her. She looks at Mike automatically, without responding. Verbally, anyway. She smiles at Mike and Will guesses that counts as a response.

Mike pauses, with a cookie halfway toward his mouth, when she smiles. He smiles back and seems to forget about the cookie completely. He just holds it in the air and stares at Eleven.

Dustin groans. He leans over and grabs the cookie from Mike. He crams it in his own mouth, waiting for Mike to say something. Anything. Nothing happens; the two of them are lost in each other's eyes. For approximately the millionth time. Jesus.

He meets Will's eyes and they both laugh. He's happy for them. Really happy for them. And he's happy that Nancy saved his ass out there earlier, but he wishes someone would look at him the way they look at each other. Oh, well. Someday. He hopes. Until then, he has his friends.

Another song starts up. Mike's still gazing at Eleven.

Wanna dance?

Yes....

He feels her hesitate. Her eyes move slightly from his face to Dustin's, then back. Mike glances at Dustin, too. Dustin looks glum. He's trying to be cheerful and he's cracking jokes like always, but yeah. He can't hide it. Not from his friends. Mike smiles at Eleven and she smiles back.

"Dustin," she says, and Dustin breaks off, mid-joke.

"Yeah?"

"Want to dance?"

He grins at her toothily. "I knew you'd have second thoughts," he jokes, and they all laugh. He stands up and pompously extends a hand. "It would be my pleasure, my lady." He leads her out to the dance floor. Within seconds, Will is dancing with Jennifer and Mike is again alone at the table. But it's okay this time. He's happy. More than happy.

Eleven dances with all of her friends, before dancing with Mike again. Lucas and Max are dancing right next to them. She smiles at them both and Max smiles back. She doesn't mind Max anymore. She likes Max. And she can tell that Lucas really likes her. Dustin taps Lucas on the shoulder and Lucas, assuming he wants to cut in and dance with Max, moves aside. He gestures with both hands, after you. Dustin surprises him by grabbing his hands and dancing with him instead. Or trying to. Lucas giggles and hits him on the shoulder repeatedly as Dustin attempts to waltz them in a circle.

"This is not exactly helping you with the ladies right now, Dustin,"

Lucas tells him as he tries to break free. Dustin serenely steers him around the room.

“A real man is secure in his masculinity,” he begins, but Lucas is already howling with laughter. Dustin cracks up, too. He gives him one spin and then delivers his friend back to Max.

He starts to make his way back to their table, but someone steps in front of him. A girl someone. She’s in Mr. Clarke’s class with them.

“Hey,” she says.

“...Hey?”

She waits expectantly.

“Oh! Want to dance?” He holds out his hand, but this time he isn’t rejected. She smiles at him and takes it. He shoots Lucas a triumphant, I told you so grin, and Lucas snickers.

Eleven watches them both, smiling a little, then leans her head on Mike’s shoulder. He rests his head against hers. His neck is warm. She breathes in his Mike smell. It’s a good smell. The best.

I’m glad you came.

She doesn’t move to look at him. She doesn’t need to.

Me too.

Are you having a good time?

Now she raises her head to look at him.

Yes.

He hears the thought clearly, and her next one, even though she doesn’t mean to send it. She turns a little pink but it’s okay, she’s not really embarrassed. She knows he doesn’t mind.

And, more importantly, she knows he feels the same way.

I never want to be anywhere else.